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Forging Alliances

“As brothers in the fight for equality,” Dr. King wrote in 1966, “I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members... You and your valiant fellow workers have demonstrated your commitment to righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people. We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized.” (Levy, 2007, p. 246).

The United States recently celebrated the 50th Anniversary March on Washington for Civil Rights. The celebrations reminded us of the relationship between Martin Luther King and César Chávez to support immigration reform and transnational engagement in nonviolent actions to free migrant farm workers and the poor from poverty and abuse. For example, during the Delano Grape Strike, César Chávez and the UFW movement formed transnational alliances by working with Philip Vera Cruz and the Delano migrant workers who were mostly Filipino (Aguirre & Lio, 2008). Still today, transnational alliances take many forms in the battle for immigration reform and schooling policies. For instance, in the renewed national debate on immigration and education, the continual struggle for Latinas/os’

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educational right to a curriculum that honors their histories, languages, and cultures calls forth new alliances to provide more nuanced understandings and actions to challenge students' inequitable learning experiences (Arizona HB 2281; Cabrera, Duncan-Andrade, Knight, & Sleeter, 2013).

In the section below, I highlight how immigrant students within a transnational, globalized context provide opportunities to rethink PreK-16 education. By transnationalism, I mean the ways in which it:

Embodies various systems or relationships that span two or more nations, including sustained and meaningful flows of people, money, labor, goods, information, advice, care and love: in addition, systems of power (i.e. Patriarchy, Westernism) can be created or reinforced in this process. (Sánchez, 2007, p. 493)

A transnational lens serves as a powerful analytic tool to better understand the lives and experiences of immigrant students within and across multiple learning contexts to challenge cultural deficit discourses. The lens also affords opportunities for educators to understand the ways in which immigrants bring multiple strengths-based assets, such as multilingualism and “belonging” to two or more countries that are often overlooked in teaching and learning processes. As a result, affirming and building upon the transnational practices of immigrants in PreK-16 educational contexts create significant entry points into teaching and learning for both students and educators. These entry points draw attention to culturally relevant practices, which build on immigrant students' transnational lives to support their learning, achievement, and development as engaged citizens.

Immigrants' Strengths-Based Assets

Immigration reform and schooling policies are heightened by globalization and the steadily increasing flux of traditional and newer immigrant groups such as Mexicans and Gambians respectively to the United States (Oh & Croc, 2011; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Children of immigrants represent about 25% of all children in the United States (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). While immigrants increasingly move to more suburban and rural areas in states such as North Carolina and Wisconsin, they continue to reside in large numbers in metropolitan areas. For instance, in the city of Grand Rapids, MI, Hispanics¹ represent approximately 16% of the population and 34.8% of students in Grand Rapids Public Schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2013). The numerical demographic shift only begins to hint at their lives and learning in the United States.

Transnational immigrants bring unique assets to this country, “such as expertise in other languages and cultural traditions that strengthen the family, communities, and society” (Trueba, 2004, p. 3). However, in the United States, conventional deficit notions of immigrant students include: limited English proficient, culturally inferior, not motivated, education is not valued, or presumed undocumented status (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Through a transnational lens, Sánchez (2007, 2009) demonstrated how moving between the country of origin and the United States promoted “children’s acquisition of local community knowledge” and a “cultural flexibility” or the ability to respond to different socio-political contexts of two or more cultural communities (p. 492). Hence, Sánchez calls educators to move beyond deficit discourses and reexamine students’ transnational assets by identifying and building on immigrants’ aspirational, familial,

navigational, social, linguistic, resistant, and spiritual assets (Pérez Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

Responding to Sánchez's call, I described the challenges and strengths of being a global citizen from the transnational perspective of one West African immigrant youth. Conventional framing of immigrant youth may not view them as engaged citizens since many are not of age to vote or may be undocumented (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). Kwame, a Ghanaian youth, rendered visible the local and global ways in which "his sense of feel[ing] like a citizen of two countries [the United States and Ghana] moves beyond notions of citizenship that focus on legal status and regulations to understanding the emotional significance a sense of belonging has for people" (Knight, 2011, p. 1281; see also Abu El-Haj, 2007). His transnational life and sense of belonging to multiple nation states allowed him to participate in civic learning. For example, he engaged in volunteer drives in high school, participated in Model UN Conferences in college, and continuously used technologies such as Facebook to transcend nation state borders and civically act across the United States, Canada, Africa, and beyond. Transnational immigrant youth such as Kwame require educators to rethink notions of learning, social learning spaces, and varied notions of civic engagement afforded by technology to build on transnational youth's assets.

Teaching and learning about identities and citizenship formation from immigrant's transnational lives and beyond the PreK-16 classroom is further highlighted in Adelante's community-university based partnership at the University of Utah which supports college attendance of Latina/o kindergarteners (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Carmona, 2008). By understanding the transnational lives of students and their families, this partnership rendered visible the links between educational rights,

sense of belonging, and cultural citizenship within immigration reform debates. Specifically, members of the partnership discussed how immigrant residential status impacts kindergarteners' college eligibility. When viewed as assets, pedagogies of their parent's homes and notions of cultural citizenship emerged. These pedagogies moved the issue of educational rights and higher education eligibility beyond an understanding of legal status to reaffirm notions of belonging, solidarity, human rights, safety, employment, and education.

Cruz (2013) further extended how support of Latina/o transnational lives within university settings and, more specifically how through student organizations, universities can challenge dismal Latin@ⁱⁱ college student retention and completion rates. Involvement in student organizations can provide opportunities for Latin@s to support one another academically, professionally, culturally, emotionally, and socially. Specifically, they can assist their peers in learning about their countries of origin, engaging in civic action to support immigration reform, and supporting academic achievement to redress higher education inequities. Applying a transnational lens to higher education reveals alliances across a community-based university partnership with students, families, college student mentors, university faculty and peers in Latin@ student organizations. These alliances build on the assets of immigrants' transnational lives to support educational achievement in PreK-16 classrooms.

Conclusion: Advancing the Dream

In linking social justice legacies to current educational immigration reform efforts, I used a transnational lens to better understand immigrants' lives and their PreK-16 educational

opportunities. A transnational lens identifies collaborative social and educational movements, immigrants' assets, and the need for schooling policies and practices that build on these assets to support immigrant students' educational achievement. Specifically, employing a transnational lens to better understand immigrant lives reframes notions of teaching and learning within and across spaces for children, youth and adults in communities and educational institutions. For example, this lens opens up opportunities to affirm immigrants' transnational practices to critique and challenge inadequate educational policies and practices such as those for newly arrived immigrant students in a high stakes testing culture.

Within a transnational lens new questions emerge such as how can educators create alliances to deliberately construct spaces of "belonging" for immigrant students who feel they belong to multiple nation states within a globalized context amidst of U.S. discourses, especially those that want to "send" them back from where their families came? Or, how can pedagogical practices shift from deficit paradigms and build on culturally relevant educational policies and practices that utilize various assets within homes and organizations to support learning with one's peers and across generations? Understanding the transnational lives of immigrants affords opportunities for us across the educational spectrum to continue to make this a more humane, peaceful and just world for a better tomorrow via educational immigrant reform.

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ⁱ I employ the term the author(s) use (e.g. Hispanic, Latino, Latina/o, Latin@) in their document).

ⁱⁱ The term *Latin@* is a contraction which some scholars in the Latin@ community are using to replace the masculine/feminine slash in the written term *Latina/o*. (e.g., see Garcia & Bayer, 2005).